DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 559 SO 034 192

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TITLE	Narratives of Youth: Cultural Critique through Spoken Word.
PUB DATE	2002-02-00
NOTE	19p.; Paper presented at the "Seminario Cientifico sobre la Calidad de la Educacion" (Matanzas, Cuba, February 2002).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Cultural Context; *Discourse Communities; Educational Benefits; *Popular Culture; Writing Workshops; *Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS	California (San Francisco); Cultural Criticism; Identity Formation; Youth Participation

ABSTRACT

This paper explores a new youth movement, spoken word, and the role it plays in identity development for many disenfranchised youth. Often addressing issues of identity, politics, gender, and power relations, young performance poets are carving out a critical public and educative space where they can speak "who they are." There is a growing youth movement in the United States built around spoken word poetry. Spoken word poetry, or performance poetry, provides a potentially critical space for teens to manipulate language in wholly customizable ways, encouraging expressive forms not often found in more conventional venues, such as educational classrooms. The growth of this popular culture movement has recently been facilitated by adult poet/performers, high school teachers, and an increasing number of community organizations, such as Youth Speaks in San Francisco (California), which offers after-school writing workshops for teens. Young people who stand up and share their poetry at poetry slams are driven not simply by an interest in reinventing language, rhymes, and representations. These youth are defining themselves and mapping their social communities, providing politically charged testimony through the use of their own realities and experiences. As youth learn how to use their voices to speak what they know, they illuminate for educators the role of spoken word in providing a critical public and educative space. This paper explores the role of that space and how it facilitates identity development for many disenfranchised youth, by examining the discursive processes of spoken word, by which identity is constructed, and to the specific language and discourses used by selected spoken word poets. The paper concludes with thoughts on the pedagogical implications of spoken word. Contains 13 selected references. (Author/BT)

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Narratives of Youth: Cultural Critique Through Spoken Word

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Matanzas, Cuba, February 2002

Abstract

This paper explores a new youth movement, spoken word, and the role it plays in identity development for many disenfranchised youth. Often addressing issues of identity politics, gender and power relations young performance poets are carving out a critical public and educative space where they can speak who they are.

> I was erased from the start...when the bars were raised on my
> confinement I looked upward for hope...let me mutter the truth
> ...we are the youth, slash, the youth is me. I am the youth
> responding to the call of the wild and the spoken word is the wild,
> so spoken word is my morse code...because we feel it, that rhythm,
> that rhythm that screams the war cries of youth rise.
> (Rafael Casal, 2001)

There is a growing youth movement in the United States built around spoken word poetry. Spoken word poetry, or performance poetry, provides a potentially critical space for teens to manipulate language in wholly customizable ways encouraging expressive forms not often found in more conventional venues such as educational classrooms. The growth of this popular culture movement, "fueled by an already existing schism between "in school" and "out of school" culture grew with unofficial curricula and learning settings" (Dimitriadis, 2001) and has recently been

facilitated by adult poet/performers, high school teachers, and an increasing number of community organizations, such as Youth Speaks in San Francisco, which offers after-school writing workshops for teens.

While spoken word poetry provides an opportunity for youth to develop focus and become more self-directed through writing and creating (Erlich, 1999) there is a lot more going on. Young people who dare to stand up and share their poetry at poetry slams are driven not simply by an interest in reinventing language, rhymes and representations; these youth are defining themselves and mapping their social communities, providing politically charged testimony through the use of their own realities and experiences.

As youth learn how to use their voices to speak what they know, they illuminate for educators the role of spoken word in providing a critical public and educative space. In this paper, we explore the role of that space and how it facilitates identity development for many disenfranchised youth by examining the discursive processes of spoken word by which identity is constructed and to the specific language and discourses used by selected spoken word poets. We conclude with some thoughts about the pedagogical implications of spoken word.

Spoken Word as License

As a youth movement, spoken word has a long and complex history influenced by hip hop music and culture with artists like Chris Parker (KRS-One), the progressive voices of Black Aesthetics such as Gil Scott Heron and The Last Poets, Sonia Sanchez, Haki R. Madhubuti and Amiri Baraka, plus other black nationalists of the 1960s as well as more traditional forms of poetry, theater and performance. Although the lineage of performance poetry is often debated, (for a good discussion of this debate see Jeffrey Louis Decker, 1994) it is hip hop's central performance and

cultural street forms of rap music, breakdancing, graffiti and MCing that youth are revising and expanding for their own purposes through spoken word performance. Tricia Rose (1994) describes the criticality of hip hop that is at the core.

> Hip hop is an Afro-diasporic cultural form which attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity and community. It is the tension between the cultural fractures produced by postindustrial oppression and the binding ties of Black cultural expressivity that sets the critical frame (p. 71).

Spoken word poets acknowledge its contested history as heard in Rafael Casal's poem called *Potential* (2001). He calls it

> that rhythm that was conceived when R&B had an affair with spoken word and created hip-hop's nephew rap and him being the bastard child of the family he became the bad ass and was sent to the back of the class like so many other lost souls but he is just the son of rhyme and the child of 'bustin' throwin' free style sessions out of proportion.

Spoken word's kinship to hip hop is written in the personal histories of the youth by what Niles Xi'an Lichtenstein (1999) calls "lyrics of liberation" in his piece *Awakening* or the possibilities of "responding to the call of the wild and the spoken word is the wild, so spoken word is my morse code" lyrically characterized by Rafael.

Fifteen year old Rafael equally invokes mythological images of the universal rhythm of matter, the vibrations encoded in DNA which defines the quality of being, "I am one with rhythm, rhythm is the breath of the world, so I am one with the world. Consider me shattered because my spirit has been torn and reborn, heaven sent to seven continents my regrets."

The rhythmic dialogic style of hip hop and rap is a magnetic draw for many but the sense of communication and community that is created and the sense of being connected to a long line of poets and rappers can be even more powerful in that it stops the isolation and confinement. For Niles "it was my ventilation...hyper extending my mind I take a deep breath, inhaling life into my lungs", experiencing liberation. Rafael calls himself a "kamikaze poet...we are merely reincarnated words of muddered rhymes long forgotten...words rearranged to create terms of pure rhythm and that's where it all started...we are pure volume." Rafael and Niles, each in his own way, tell of how they tap into and use the traditions of spoken word poetry at youth poetry slams as a vehicle for self reflection and even redemption, "no longer docile but ready to break the shackles, made my deliverance in the sentence, my pen my protection, my spiritual resurrection" (Niles Xi'an Lichtenstein).

While hip hop was originally performed on street corners, poetry slams use semi-autonomous public spaces such as event centers, campus student unions and progressive organization cultural spaces which support progressive community-building networks, a potential for forming new social movements such as the black peace movement in Washington D. C. Juxtaposed to community building, slam events add an edge by formalizing the confrontational and competitive aspects of hip hop, by giving marks for the poetry performance and the response it elicits from the audience. Tricia Rose (1994) suggests that the competitive and confrontational traits found in hip hop rivalries

function as both a resistance to the hostile world which denigrates young people of color and a preparation for such a world. The battle for prestige, status and group adoration is fueled at regional and national slam events where city teams of performance poets from different parts of the country gather to compete. Similarities in style, sound, and motion are used to express local experiences and social position. At the 1999 national poetry slam held in Albuquerque, however, poets protested the hierarchical marking system claiming that it was a divisive mechanism that sabotaged the intent of community-building and comradery (Poetic License, 2000). The contradictions of poetry slams, like that of hip hop as a whole, point to the contestation of urban life which is always in formation, yet never ending nor fully realized.

The Language of Spoken Word

Writing and performing poetry can be thought of as mechanisms for "managing stigmatized identities" (Hurtado,1996, p. 375) as youth document the maneuvers they have developed to generate knowledge about their conflict-ridden lives. Youth in the United States, positioned by color, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class and age must negotiate their power and social identities since not all groups are valued equally. Learning to navigate outsider status, acculturation stress and alienation can lead to "successful marginality" generating unique knowledge and providing rich local resources that are not available to those in dominant power positions. This is preferable to assimilating and camouflaging themselves in a false, unproblematic social identity (Hurtado, 1996).

The challenge is to know what you know and as youth form social, or cultural, identities they must learn to circumvent the consequences of that knowledge. Looking at the discursive practices of young spoken word poets, there is a valued radical openness and courage to speak out about lived experiences; an inside perspective, personal and vulnerable. They talk about what they see. Through

the use of language they resist false constructions of their lives and experiences. Instead they define themselves and struggle against forgetting who they are. Language is a site of struggle.

Recurring themes in spoken word include, among others, the struggle to define oneself as different from dominant stereotypes, power relationships and inequality, mental subjugation to the dominant culture and liberation, gender issues such as abortion rights and misogyny, pride in indigenous ancestry, loss of innocence, the influence of media images, racial identity, colonization of various sorts, hope and heroic struggles.

The poetry of two differently positioned young women from the San Francisco Bay area serve as examples of the varied discourses and language forms used to define local life worlds. As positioned subjects individuals occupy materially and socially contextualized lives in relationship to equally constructed others. It is this positionality that gives meaning to who they are and who they can become.

Chinaka Hodge is a sixteen year old African American from Oakland. Chinaka's poem, *Barely Audible* (2001), speaks of the young people hopelessly inhabiting her economically depressed, largely African American neighborhood. Daries, who "clutches his brown paper bag, all his dreams packaged at the liquor store" homeless and "dying beneath billboards." Trina,

> She's fourteen, womanly, big bosom, bigger bottom.
> Everybody wants to hold her thigh, hold her breast, hold her back,
> nobody wants to hold her hand.
> Everyone thinks she's sexy. Really she's devine and confused.
> Piecing together family, she's pregnant for the second time.

Descriptive of poor inner city landscapes with alcohol sedatives, homelessness, teen pregnancy, despair, and alienation, the throw away youth are simply marking time, "they're expected to fail."

Their neighborhood is not their own, however, because there are "potential buyers...and SUVs with plates that read conquistadores...can't afford the city so they scope west Oakland. Stare right through the ghosts of children and see a fixer-upper. They can build homes on the graveyard, nobody's living here anyway." Describing the gentrification of her neighborhood she says:

This is Atlantic reminiscent, she [Trina] echos the hymns,

the bowels of slave ships.

And I'm watching this from my window.

This is the sound of the projects falling apart,

they're busting at the seams.

Quilted so grandma can't piece them back together.

Within the despair Chinaka shows us the struggle to survive in dire circumstances. Trina does whatever she can to make ends meet while raising her children, "she's got to make ten pampers stretch through the week" and calls out for help through "sad pupils and pools of despair behind her eyelids." Chinaka sees "Trina's a potential savior. She's living herself to death doing backstrokes to make ends meet" while crying out for help but "the conquerors can't hear her pleading above Alanis Morisset in their SUVs."

How is it that Chinaka knows about this world, knows this world. She tells us she is looking through the window, "got my nose pressed against the glass." Chinaka is speaking of her world. She is part of the scene, knows the people and identifies with the "potential martyrs" that will be

sacrificed to economic progress, ignorance and neglect and to the "potential saviors" who struggle against such difficult and indifferent odds. Is she Trina calling out for help and not being heard?

She testifies to the violence against human beings, against families, against neighborhoods which are neglected until the conquistadores have some desire for them. She lives in a contemporary world of neighborhood imperialism reminiscent of the past. Chinaka reaches into her African history through the use of religious icons of martyrs and saviors and walking dead and by invoking images and sounds of slavery such as "Atlantic reminiscent", "hymns", "the bowels of slave ships", "auction blocks", and aural images of "bam bam sold, bam bam sold" in order to connect the past to the present neighborhood scenes thus placing herself within the text.

We hear in her words the bodily memory of slavery and oppression, of imperialist exploitation at the expense of those who live in "abject poverty" and through the aural sounds of the auction blocks of slavery. "Even if I draw the blinds I can still hear this, auction blocks, bam bam sold, bam bam sold." The conquerors are taking over her community, selling her people out. As an African American teen, Chinaka aligns herself with her community and the struggles she witnesses and perhaps lives herself. From her life she gleans unique knowledge of struggle and connection, juxtaposing historical and contemporary images, and the indifference of imperialists which render the potential martyrs and saviors of her world invisible, powerless and disposable.

The poetry of Kassy Kiayatos is an unrelenting first-person rant against the unconsidered wide-spread misogyny and accepted mainstream cultural ideas about women and sexuality. Her appearance, including blue-hair and strong affect, combine with her words in *There are no definites* (20001), performed with Renee Van, to challenge these dominant ideas.

Everything you've ever learned or heard is irrelevant, there are no definites.

now you could take a picture and then take that shit home and try

to figure it out but I know that you'll fold in with confusion and still

be riddled with doubt, your mind will try to find all the malfunctions

that I might be.

Maybe I was an intersex baby who couldn't choose

gender on its own

or maybe I'm a girl who's now a boy popping testosterone

but no matter which conclusions you come to in your head

know that, you ain't got me read!

Kassy presents herself in creative and shifting terms as an "intersex baby" and "a girl who's now a boy". Not only does she present herself as ambiguous but knows from her personal experience how those who carry a narrow one-way view of gender and sexuality respond to her, "I'm so far outside of the reach of your reality you can't even imagine me, so you pigeonhole with your pronouns."

She laments, "I don't hate without reason, I'm not fickle with the changing seasons, this is how I was born. For too long I suffered the scorn and scrutiny of a society that would never be able to see me as I am....I don't fit any mold you've made." The "scorn and scrutiny" serve to mask, or attempt to make invisible, one's existence, discounting identity through violent discourse of accusation and scorn; this, of course, has been going on in mainstream culture for generations.

The strength of hegemonic heterosexual ideals, imaged by "you pigeonhole with your pronouns" and "I don't fit any mold you've made", suggest the clearly defined distinctions between

gender identities and insinuate their power through mechanisms of silence, defense, pretending and forgetting. Kassy knows what she is up against, "you'll still do what you do and jump to conclusions.....your kind of primal mind will always need to find a category or group to fit everything" suggesting a technicist reality with its over reliance on scientific cause and effect, linear processing and privileged status.

Her piece is layered with multiple images of how gender is constructed and how it is maintained by the dominant culture. By looking at these relational aspects of sexual difference we see how historical processes position subjects and produce their experiences of exclusion and marginality; we see both how knowledge is produced and how identity is formed (Scott, 1992).

While we hear the words of resistance which structure gender practices another layer, or reading, shows the multiple voices within self as Kassy moves back and forth between her world and the mainstream. In her line, "it's been far too long defending my appearance pretending to need your clearance and acceptance" Kassy shows the impact of the "scorn and scrutiny"; the contradictory desire to be accepted. But there is resistance, a turn away from the need for dominant culture acceptance.

> I have a dream too that one day I'll be able to do as I please without taking shit....you can bet I break all the rules of tradition...I'll start removing blinders without permission, expand the bounds of your existence, come at you with a team of persistence until you accept what's up or kill my ass...I'm definitely not irrelevant.

Taking a stand against her oppressors she cries out in resistance, "I don't need my life OKed

by the mainstream." Finding strength in the necessity of resistance (hooks, 1990), she forges an outspoken identity which creates a space in which "to survive whole, soul intact" (hooks, 1990, p. 148). "Removing blinders without permission" break[ing] all the rules of tradition" "com[ing] at you with a team of persistence" are some of the strategies she employs.

Kassy addresses the underlying fear and violence of those who have bought into the dominant ideas of sexuality, "my ambiguity is now your nemesis" thus proposing the ultimate challenge, "to you nothing could be scarier than acceptance, no not that half-assed tolerance but actually removing yourself from the ignorance...these bodies are nothing, gender identity is all an illusion" Can fear of women and lesbian culture be overcome? She tells what is required. Not just tolerance for difference but a committed effort of education that can transform perspective moving beyond immutable binary identities of man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, either/or that mark patriarchal thinking.

Equally important to the confrontation is the use of her appearance and affect to move beyond reason and logic to evoke emotion and feeling, or irrationality. By stimulating emotion she disrupts and destabilizes the dominant discourse. Although she combines the irrational (fear) with the rational (language), in the end, she relies on reason by saying, "I'm just here to school on your opposition, use your tools, that I will use to break down barriers" and "my words hit you twice as hard as my ascetic." Does she use the master's tools to intimidate because she knows the power of words, "when words could still brutalize me" or could it be that she uses words to dare to speak truths that are not usually spoken, "to break an absolutely sanctioned public silence" (Scott, 1992, p. 23)?

Through Chinaka and Kassy's poetry we see how difference is established , how it operates, and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. They provide story, history and critical examination of the workings of ideological systems of patriarchy, racism and capitalism

which position them as subjects in their own lives. As young women performing through spoken word, Chinaka and Kassy represent a growing cadre of women who are becoming involved in popular performance culture. This has not been the case with the male-dominated patriarchal hip hop and rap which has often been downright hostile and hateful to women. Youth poetry slams provide a space for women to speak out and contribute their voices to the partial views that currently dominate public life.

Spoken Word Poetry Slams as Critical Spaces

Poetry slam events represent public spaces for communication where conversations are initiated and dialogue is engaged. Youth are claiming this space as a critical and open venue where social commentary and political poetry is the norm. It is a powerful space. June Jordon states, "slam poetry loudly raises issues the canon does not touch: issues of race, class and sexuality" (cited in Neely, June 30, 1998, p. 62). There is not only the freedom to negotiate experiences of oppression within imperatives of identity and community but there is an expectation that these issues will be taken up. Critiques of the contemporary urban context and the colonizing social and cultural conditions that are produced find voice from the marginal space of resistance (hooks, 1990).

Poetry slams and spoken word poetry have the potential to be counter-hegemonic cultural practices for those who defiantly confront the realities of choice and location. It is a space and art form with the purpose of creating a new course in the margins. bell hooks (1990) calls this a chosen margin, "a space of radical openness...a profound edge" which is "difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance" (p. 149). As more and more public spaces in the United States are being appropriated by the entrenchment of reactionary conservative politics in the name of globalization, "home land security" or moral standards and

suspects of descent are increasingly suspicious, poetry slams are being used as a space for resistance and become a relatively safe haven for community and cultural critique.

Choosing the margin as a location from which to speak and in which to situate one's power means there is capacity to envision a different reality; there is a sense of hope that might sustain the struggle. Niles X'ian Lichtenstein (1999) embodies this sense of hope in his lines,

> I laugh at the system. You can't trap me, I've broken free and I'm happy
> being me, couldn't keep my thoughts locked down, too profound to be
> kept underground. Cultivating concepts similar to bomb threats to eradicate
> your cold careless chains and annihilate this predestined fate of pain. See,
> this life can magically manifest itself into your heaven or into your hell,
> depending on our decision to stay submissive or rebel.

Again, following hooks, "our very presence is a disruption" (1990, p. 148) and there is no safety, there is always risk. In the margin, as a space of refusal, one can say no to the colonizer, "no to being the next young brother locked down, ka-ching/no to keeping my true thoughts driven underground" (Niles X'ian Lichtenstein).

As a space of possibility poetry slams also provide an educative venue where young people are both teaching each other about their life worlds and learning about spoken word as a form of poetry. They talk with each other, through their poetry, about how they experience their lives and how they live their lives. They talk freely about their differences and what it means to refuse to give up who they are. Within the competitiveness of slams there is an accepted pluralism and diversity of perspectives. Testimonial language legitimizes and makes visible that which has been veiled or invisible in the dominant media culture thus providing alternative knowledges while at the same time

promoting greater understanding of difference.

Spoken word as an art form of voice and body is learned and developed as stories are told and retold. Following hip hop motion, language, style, and gesture youth must think about how they want to sound and the pitch of their voice, what they want to do with their bodies, and how to approach their choice of material. They must decide what conversation they want to start or join. Tricia Rose (1994) characterizes hip hop as a construction of flow, layering, and ruptures which define the genre. These traits are found in spoken word where multiple meanings layered upon each other are common place and rhythmic flow is alternately fast paced, repeated, or stuttered often including spoken sound effects that add visual images. Rose suggests that the ruptures in written and spoken style as well as bodily movements signal the practice of planning for social upheaval that results from profound dislocation; these effects serve as an affirmation of flexibility and resistance. Exploring and reinventing language and creating powerful representations is sometimes fluid, sometimes strident.

Pedagogical Implications of Spoken Word

It is useful to think of poetry slams as critical spaces where identities are formed, cultural lives and social conditions are critiqued. The use of performance poetry as a located space that is critically public and educative marks cultural boundaries of youth culture and symbolizes the license and power that slam poets exert to define and identify themselves and their culture.

Rafael and Niles tell of the inspiration of spoken word as spaces that can interrupt, appropriate and transform worlds of despair, oppression and erasure. Chinaka and Kassy find a space to recount and provide testimony to lives under gender, class and racial suppression. All seem to use spoken word as a space where they can illuminate and transform the present, each in relevant and

significant ways.

Hurtado (1996) talks about the strategies of knowing that facilitate a shifting consciousness which is flexible and enabling. The shifting consciousness is an adaption which allows one to "shift" from one social reality to another or, at other times, to be able to simultaneously perceive multiple social realities. This is a strategy of survival that Niles, Rafael, Chinaka, and Kassy document through their poetry. The knowledge they have created deconstructs man-made categories of privileged knowing and positions them as legitimate knowers.

The "in school" "outside of school" schism described by Dimitriadis (2001) suggests there is a disconnect between the lives of youth and their educational activities. Youth culture is about identity formation, community building and development of strategic knowledge production. If educators are interested in facilitating critical learning, spoken word performance poetry should be explored to examine the ways in which this happens, to examine the venues of spoken word that are used by youth to define themselves, their lived experiences and cultures, the spaces that help them cope with ever changing and troubling times.

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EFF-088 (Rev. 2/2001)